



CITY OF
ROLLING HILLS ESTATES

CITY MANAGER'S CORNER

September 8, 2010

WHAT IS A CITY MANAGER?

With the on-going revelations and controversy surrounding the City Manager's compensation in the City of Bell, I have previously taken the opportunity afforded by this forum to address both the proper methods by which public salaries are established and disclose my compensation package as the City Manager of Rolling Hills Estates. But there seems to be some general public confusion as to what exactly a City Manager is, what he does, how he gets his job and how he views his role in local government. I hope to address some of these issues in this column.

A Unique Position

The predominant form of municipal government organization in California today is the Council-Manager form of government. It was born out of the Progressive Movement of the late 19th and early 20th Century as a reaction to the abuses of the "spoils" system, whereby government jobs were given by elected officials to their political supporters as a reward for helping them win an election, rather than employing the most qualified candidate for a particular position.

In a General Law City such as Rolling Hills Estates, the City Manager is the only City employee directly appointed by and responsible to the elected City Council. This provides an arms-length relationship between the City Council and all other employees, thus precluding any undue influence by a Member of the Council on the appointment or daily activities of any City employee. This allows all employees to undertake their responsibilities free from political influence, giving the public and the Council unbiased and professional service and recommendations on a wide variety of issues which come before the City.

I have previously likened the City Manager to a corporate CEO, with the City Council serving as the Board of Directors of the Municipal Corporation. Like a CEO, the City Manager has a vision for the direction of the organization, but must yield ultimate policy direction to the directly elected representatives so the citizenry. As the only employee directly responsible to the City Council, the City Manager is in a unique position to both influence the creation of policy and direct its implementation. This requires a balance of professionalism and pragmatism, and willingness to subordinate ego when necessary.

That is not to say that a City Manager should not hold firm convictions, or argue a position passionately. Quite the opposite is true. The City Manager has an obligation to give the City Council a well reasoned professional opinion on matters of public policy. However, the City Manager must be able to enthusiastically implement policies properly considered and set by the City Council with which he may not agree.

What Does a City Manager Do?

While the City Council reviews a broad range of issues and sets policy, the City Manager is the professional administrator appointed by the City Council who is responsible for directing the operations of a municipality.

As the top appointed official in the city, the City Manager supervises the day-to-day operations of all departments and staff; directs overall government operations with the assistance of other professional administrators and department heads; prepares the agenda for and attends all City Council meetings as the City Council's primary advisor; identifies policy issues for City Council consideration; prepares a budget with options and recommendations for City Council consideration and implements programs approved therein; ensures compliance with all City ordinances; reviews and recommends actions to respond to existing and/or pending state and federal laws and regulations affecting cities; oversees all aspects of the City's personnel system, including employee hiring, firing, discipline, labor negotiations and compliance with all applicable labor laws; proposes and administers all City contracts; represents the City's position on a variety of issues before the public and other legislative bodies or levels of government; and interacts with the public in meetings with residents, businesses and homeowners associations.

How Do You Become a City Manager?

Most City Managers have studied Public Administration as part of their college curriculum. Many have made it their primary focus of study as there are a number of outstanding schools of public policy throughout California. For myself, I hold a Masters of Business and Public Administration from U.C. Irvine.

But education is only part of the equation. Most City Managers come up through the ranks of city employees, spending years learning the craft of public management as an assistant in a City Manager's office or a department head in some other municipal discipline, such as planning or public works. It is the rare City Manager who comes from the private sector as there are distinct differences in the public arena that make the job unique from business administration. Open meeting and public personnel laws are just two of the more challenging differences that come to mind.

So, with education and experience in hand, how do you actually become a City Manager? You compete. While many cities promote from within (Rolling Hills Estates did so with both my predecessor and me) most City Managers are selected from a competitive recruitment process. A City Council may choose to conduct the recruitment on its own or utilize the services of a professional executive search firm. Typically, candidates are either established City Managers or high level assistants or department heads looking to promote. Each City in California is unique and each City Council is looking for that unique fit between the community and the candidate. Applications and resumes are submitted, screening takes place, interviews are held, the Council deliberates, a selection is made, a contract is negotiated and a new City Manager is installed. Compensation is based on the City Manager's performance, experience and qualifications, comparison with other similarly situated communities and the City's ability to pay.

The Public Trust

As a public figure, the City Manager must be honest, exude integrity and have a firm commitment to service. The City Manager must keep in mind daily the duty to provide accurate, professional and unbiased advice to and diligently implement the policy direction of the City Council. By doing so, both the community and the profession are well served.

Membership in the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) provides guidance and support for the City Manager through the development and publication of tenets of effective local governance. The City Manager who dutifully practices these tenets will never be the subject of scandal. These core beliefs are as follows:

Tenet 1

Be dedicated to the concepts of effective and democratic local government by responsible elected officials and believe that professional general management is essential to the achievement of this objective.

Tenet 2

Affirm the dignity and worth of the services rendered by government and maintain a constructive, creative, and practical attitude toward local government affairs and a deep sense of social responsibility as a trusted public servant

Tenet 3

Be dedicated to the highest ideals of honor and integrity in all public and personal relationships in order that the member may merit the respect and confidence of the elected officials, of other officials and employees, and of the public.

Tenet 4

Recognize that the chief function of local government at all times is to serve the best interests of all people.

Tenet 5

Submit policy proposals to elected officials; provide them with facts and advice on matters of policy as a basis for making decisions and setting community goals; and uphold and implement local government policies adopted by elected officials.

Tenet 6

Recognize that elected representatives of the people are entitled to the credit for the establishment of local government policies; responsibility for policy execution rests with the members.

Tenet 7

Refrain from all political activities which undermine public confidence in professional administrators. Refrain from participation in the election of the members of the employing legislative body.

Tenet 8

Make it a duty continually to improve the member's professional ability and to develop the competence of associates in the use of management techniques.

Tenet 9

Keep the community informed on local government affairs; encourage communication between the citizens and all local government officers; emphasize friendly and courteous service to the public; and seek to improve the quality and image of public service.

Tenet 10

Resist any encroachment on professional responsibilities, believing the member should be free to carry out official policies without interference, and handle each problem without discrimination on the basis of principle and justice.

Tenet 11

Handle all matters of personnel on the basis of merit so that fairness and impartiality govern a member's decisions, pertaining to appointments, pay adjustments, promotions, and discipline.

Tenet 12

Seek no favor; believe that personal aggrandizement or profit secured by confidential information or by misuse of public time is dishonest.

Additionally, in California, City Managers are supported by the League of California Cities' City Managers' Department and the California City Management Foundation. Any issue that a City Manager faces can be brought before these support bodies either informally or formally and guidance, assistance or education can be provided. With all the resources available to City Managers in California, there is no excuse for failure to act in accordance with the highest expectations of the public trust.

On a personal note, let me say that I take great pride in implementing the policy direction of the City Council and assisting in maintaining the high quality of life that our residents have come to value and expect, which is what makes this community such a desirable and pleasant place to live and work. As I have mentioned before in this forum, I consider myself to be among the fortunate few who have a career they truly enjoy, and am lucky enough to be able to pursue it in this piece of paradise we call Rolling Hills Estates. I will continue to work hard to be worthy of the trust placed in me by the City Council, the staff and the citizens of this community.